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PEDDLER ON ORCHARD STREET - 1949

by Sol Wieder

Since I was a part time student at a Yeshiva on the Lower East Side and could not afford decent living accommodations, I had no choice but to live in a tenement furnished room on Clinton Street, across the street from the Clinton Movie Theater. I had many uninvited strange guests keeping me company. They were cockroaches and other bugs who shared the bed with me. My tiny furnished room had a bed, a night table without a lamp, a folding chair and lots of nails on the door to hang my wardrobe which consisted of a coat, a suit, an extra jacket and two pair of pants. The ceiling had an old fixture with four outlets but only one outlet had a 25 watt light bulb. I was permitted to shave, wash my face, brush my teeth and comb my hair in the landlady's kitchen sink.

The creeping bugs used to annoy me at night. I did not appreciate it when "they" crawled over my face. They used to tickle my nostrils. I don't think they ever entered my nose, although I could swear they made an attempt to. After a while, the small bugs and creeping cockroaches no longer bothered me, even though I was aware of their presence.

Since the apartment had no bathroom, I was advised to use an old glass milk bottle to empty my bladder at night and dispose of it every morning in the small tub attached to the kitchen sink. Whenever the need arose, I used the toilet facilities in the hallway shared by all the tenants on the floor. No matter when I needed to use the toilet facilities, there was always several people ahead of me, waiting on pins and needles. The torn pieces of paper on the floor, dirt and feces all over the place and the smell that poisoned the air, reminded me of the toiled facilities in the Bergen Belsen concentration camp. Someday, I said to myself, I will also be liberated from the "living quarters" on Clinton Street in the good old USA. Once a week, I used the "bath house" which was several blocks away. There, I washed, bathed and cleaned myself thoroughly.

Every morning, as soon as I saw day light I left my room to return only at night, as late as I possibly could. There was nothing that pulled me to return early to the "dump" as some people referred to the five story walk up on Clinton Street. I often ate my meals at cafeterias in the vicinity. All I did was to order a coffee or tea and wait for a customer to leave. I would then change my seat and grab the left over food before returning the empty tray. After a short while I became an expert at it and it worked like a charm.

Since I had ample time on my hands and the thought of returning early to my furnished room gave me the chills, I spent a great deal of my time at the Fifth Avenue Public Library on 42nd Street, where I would browse thru many sections. The library staff were under the impression that I was doing research as I looked presentable, quiet and respectful. At the library, I used to read many domestic English and Yiddish periodicals, including foreign publications from the world over. I just couldn't get enough of it.

When I was not at the library, I used to observe the many "peddlers" on Orchard Street, a popular market place for new immigrants who were trying to

make a living. I used to envy some peddlers who came with a box or two of merchandise and were completely sold out by mid-day. Most peddlers refused to share information with me as to where they purchased their merchandise. The average answer was: "I need a competitor like a hole in the head."

One day, I met a peddler who recognized me and asked: Were you ever in Sweden? Aren't you the guy who organized the holocaust survivors in the city of Malmo and formed the "1945 Holocaust Survivors Association?" Yes, that's me, my name used to be Shlomo Wieder. Shlomo became Sol. After all we are in America now.

What's yours?
I am Josef Lipinsky, Josef with an "f."
What are you doing here ?
I am checking out Orchard Street to see whether I could sell something and make a few dollars. God knows that I could use some extra money

In that case, stay with me to the end, Josef said. As soon as I finish selling my merchandise, you and I will go to a loft on Broadway, near Canal Street where they sell all kind of merchandise. They have everything and they sell only wholesale. They don't care who you are. All they want to know is whether or not you have money in your pocket. I told Josef that it sounds good.

Josef and I took the subway at the Delancey Street Station to Canal Street. We walked several small blocks to the wholesaler. I was introduced to "Ziggi" one of a fast talking salesman who sized me up and advised me to sell "ties." That's the easiest thing for a man with one hand, he said. No packing, nothing.... You sell the ties, you put them in a brown bag and you collect the money. It's simple as that... If you are a good peddler, he said; you will make good money on Orchard Street.

Ziggi asked me: How much money I have?
Twenty dollars, was my reply.
In that case, we will sell you eighty ties, that means four ties for one dollar.
Kapish? It comes out to 25 cent a tie.

I will give you a large selection of ties so that the customers can have their choice. You can sell them for 50 cents each. I don't mean that you sell time at a time. No, no. That would be self defeating. You sell them in pairs of two, like two ties for one dollar. When you sell out all the ties, you will return to our "loft" with twenty dollars, and we will give you a new batch of eighty ties and you will keep the other twenty dollars for yourself. Not bad.

Kapish?
Kapish, I got you, I said.
Ziggy told me that he will also enclose a small supply of paper bags. He did.

I thanked Josef, my new friend from Sweden. I'll see you on Orchard Street/corner Delancey Street tomorrow bright and early, he said. Josef and I left, each in a different direction.

The following day, I showed up at my destination before ten in the morning. I selected a spot where I did not see any competitors selling ties. I found an empty carton which I used as a stand, opened my box of ties and I was ready to conquer the world. In a loud voice, I made my official announcement:

Two ties for a dollar.
Two ties for a dollar.
Come and get it, while supply lasts.
Two ties for a dollar.....

A peddler next to me, selling dried fruit begged me not to yell so loud. You will wake up all the dead people with your yelling and screaming. I complied. Obviously, it was still too loud for him as he vanished in search of a new location.

Potential customers came and left. Some looked at the ties and some checked me out. Some came back to touch the ties and verify whether they heard the price correctly. Yes sir, I said. The price is only two ties for one dollar. The price is three times as much at Gimbel's, That man was my first customer and I sold him two ties.

Seventy eight "ties" to go, I said....

A young man looked over the selection of ties and was having difficulties making a decision. After ten minutes, he handed me a dollar bill and I gave him two ties. He returned a few minutes later to make an exchange. I continued yelling:

Two ties for one dollar.
Come and get it.....

Suddenly, without warning I noticed an older man coming across the street. Oh, my God, I said. This is Isaac Fuchs, an old friend of my father, a holocaust survivor from my home town, a man who used to be in the lumber business, one of the richest people in town, a millionaire.

What shall I do now? I can't let him see me "peddling" ties. I was so ashamed. Can you imagine? Shlomo Wieder, Jacob's son became a peddler in America?

As Isaac kept getting closer and closer to me, I kept slowly stepping away from my bundle of ties. I was not going to let him see what became of me. I did not want his pity or sympathy. Finally, Isaac caught up with me. We greeted each other warmly.

Shlomo, what are you doing on Orchard Street?
I was supposed to meet a friend of mine, I said.
I guess, he is late. Who knows whether he'll ever show up?
Shlomo, in that case lets go to Delancey Street and have a coffee at the cafeteria.

I left my bundle of ties and walked with Isaac in the direction of Delancey Street, looking back several times to see if my ties were safe. As we walked further, I asked Isaac what he was doing here? Without hesitation, he told me that he heard that if you have a good product, you can make good money on Orchard Street. Hearing that, I excused myself and told Isaac that I would meet him in a few minutes at the cafeteria. I also convinced myself, if peddling was good enough for Isaak, a former millionaire, it certainly is good enough for me and I have nothing to be ashamed off.

I ran as fast as I could to rescue my merchandise. God, please help me, I said. I hope it's not too late and the ties are still where I left them. I earnestly hoped to find fortune, my ties...

Well, I didn't.

Everything was gone, there were no signs of my ties - even the box that I used as a stand was gone. I was out of business. Tears filled my eyes and I was too humiliated to go and have coffee with Isaac. I remember looking up to the sky and said;

Dear God:
Are you having fun?
Are you happy now?